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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF SELECTED ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS OF STUDENT PERSONNEL AND ADMINISTRATORS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT.

National Association of Student Personnel Administration, Detroit, Mich.

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An exploratory study was carried out to: (1) identify the assumptions held by members of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) on issues important to the profession; (2) determine how widely held the assumptions are; (3) stimulate NASPA members to re-examine their assumptions and discuss with their colleagues the issues raised in the survey instrument; and (4) identify topics for more extensive and systematic investigation. There is greatest agreement among NASPA members on: (1) the guarantee of an appellate hearing as an essential procedural safeguard against the abuse of authority; (2) the consistent support of the central functions of the college; (3) the maintenance of loyalty to the central administration; (4) the justification of an educational role for student personnel administrators; and (5) the freedom of students to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Disagreement was found in the areas of: (1) social conduct regulations; (2) the desirability of excusing students in emotional difficulties from university standards or requirements; (3) the areas of student decision-making; (4) the common perception of the deans as a limiter of student freedoms having negative implications for his future in higher education; and (5) student status imposing special limitations on citizenship freedoms. (Author/PS)

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STUDENT PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATORS

AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF SELECTED ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS OF STUDENT PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATORS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT*

NASPA, DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Regardless of academic training and background, each student personnel administrator, with varying degrees of awareness, makes certain theological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, political and professional assumptions. These basic assumptions obviously influence the professional behavior of the student personnel administrator, and one's efficacy as an educator may be markedly enhanced by periodic critical re-examination of these assumptions and their implications. The present study is designed, in part, to stimulate this process.

Purposes of the Investigation

The investigation here reported was an exploratory study with four primary objectives. First, to identify the assumptions of members of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators on a number of issues important to the profession. Second, to determine how widely these are held by deans of students and other student personnel administrators who belong to NASPA. Third, to stimulate NASPA members to re-examine their assumptions and to discuss with their colleagues many of the issues raised, however obliquely, in the survey instrument. Fourth, to identify topics for more extensive and systematic empirical investigation with such methods as a "critical incidents" approach, on the one hand, and for philosophical position papers, on the other.

There was an additional more long-range objective of this exploratory investigation. Namely, to provide a basis for initiating discussions with behavioral scientists who could comment on the assumptions of student personnel administrators from the perspective provided by behavioral science theory and research. Similar comments from representatives of other academic disciplines may be sought as well. Hopefully, such comments will assist the student personnel administrator who is evaluating his assumptions by either reinforcing them as a basis of action or forcing a revision of those which are both idiosyncratic and without empirical or theoretical support from the relevant academic disciplines.

Research Strategy

The data was gathered by means of a twenty-seven item questionnaire. Each item consisted of a statement to which the respondent selected one of the following six forced-choice responses; strongly agree, agree, agree with reservations, disagree with reservations, disagree, strongly disagree. The respondent was asked to specify the nature of his reservations whenever he chose the third or fourth alternatives and space was provided for this purpose. In addition, all respondents were invited to use the available space to write any comments which they wished to make regardless of their response to the initial statement. Many NASPA members offered instructive comments in response to this invitation.

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*This preliminary presentation of the raw data of our study is intended to stimulate and facilitate discussions at our Seattle meeting. A complete research report which analyzes and discusses the data will be available in the fall.

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The exploratory nature of this investigation and the particular combination of objectives for the study led to two elements of the research strategy which should be noted. First, in order to stimulate discussion the statements were deliberately worded, in some instances, in a provocative fashion. Second, the desire to have NASPA members actually take a position on the issues raised in the questionnaire dictated the absence of response categories such as "uncertain," "cannot say," "don't know," or "haven't given it enough thought." As a result some respondents chose not to answer some of the items, but in all but two cases this was less than four per cent of the respondents and in no case was it greater than six per cent.

The questionnaire was sent to twenty NASPA members as a pilot study prior to more general distribution and the results suggested changes in the wording of several statements and in the nature of the response alternatives which were incorporated in the final form of the questionnaire.

Survey Population and the Extent of Response

The questionnaire was mailed on January 10, 1966, to all persons on the NASPA mailing list as of January 1, 1966. Thus, 691 questionnaires were distributed to NASPA members, 416 (60%) of which were returned by the deadline. A follow-up letter to the non-respondents (except for 30 in non-campus assignments such as fraternity secretaries) yielded another 116 questionnaires for a total response of 522 (76%). Since four of these were received after we conducted our data analysis, the results of the study are based on 518 completed questionnaires.

Data Analysis

This exploratory investigation was concerned only with the assumptions of student personnel administrators holding membership in NASPA rather than with the assumptions of all student personnel administrators. Thus, population statistics rather than sample statistics were used in the data analysis. In this report, the results are reported in terms of both frequency distributions and percentage figures.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Four hundred ninety-nine of the 518 respondents were employed in various positions in student personnel administration during the past academic year. Of these, 290 (57% of the total) hold the position of dean of students or other chief personnel offices, 77 (15%) were dean of men, 64 (12%) were either associate or assistant deans of students or assistant deans of men, and 68 (13%) were "non-dean" members of the student personnel staff.

Perhaps one could describe the respondents to this questionnaire as experienced but mobile. Although 152 (29%) of those who replied to this questionnaire have been in student personnel administration for less than three years, 112 (22%) have had over fifteen years experience and the median length of service in student personnel positions was 8.2 years. On the other hand, the median length of service in one's present position was only 3.44 years with 195 (38%) of the respondents in their first or second year in their present position and only 27 (5%) who have been in their present position over fifteen years.

An examination of the educational background of the respondents indicates that the majority (56%) hold degrees in education or student personnel work. One hundred fifty-seven (30%) received their highest academic degree in the field of student personnel work and an additional 133 (26%) obtained their highest degree in education or higher education. Sixty-four of those who replied to the questionnaire hold degrees in psychology and 52 hold degrees in other behavioral science fields. Thus, 116 (22%) hold degrees in the behavioral sciences whereas only 76 (15%) hold degrees in the humanities, 26 (5%) in the natural sciences and mathematics, 6 in theology, and 6 in law.

Two hundred and twenty (43%) were educated at the doctoral level with 108 (21%) of them holding the Ph.D. degree. A larger number, 246 (48%) hold the master's degree with most of them in student personnel work (90), education (37) and higher education (28).

Two hundred eighty-one (54%) of the respondents hold academic rank; 113 as Professors, 82 as Associate Professors, 58 as Assistant Professors and 16 as instructors with 12 designated as lecturer or some comparable title. Of these, 152 were teaching during the past academic year and an additional 35 had taught within the past two years. Two hundred thirty-one of the respondents had no academic rank even though 24 of them were currently teaching and 32 more had taught within the past two years. Thus, 176 (34%) of the total respondent group were teaching and an additional 67 had taught recently. Two hundred sixty-nine of the respondents have not taught during the past two years, however, and 175 of these persons did not hold academic rank.

Although the appropriate statistical analyses have yet to be performed, an inspection of the data suggests that the NASPA members responding to this questionnaire are representative of NASPA in terms of the size, type, and location of the institution which they represent. Two hundred sixty-five (51%) of the respondents were employed in large or small public universities, 95 (18%) were employed in private non-sectarian, protestant or catholic universities, and 133 (26%) were employed in private liberal arts colleges of non-sectarian, protestant or catholic control. Only 13 of the respondents were employed in technical institutes. The geographical distribution of the respondents appears roughly representative of NASPA with the largest number being in regions IV, II and V.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of this exploratory investigation. For the purposes of the presentation of this data the statements have been grouped into four general categories which to some extent indicates the logical relationship between the statements included in the questionnaire.

An examination of these results indicates that there is greatest agreement among NASPA members on statements which indicate that 1) the guarantee of an appellate hearing is an essential procedural safeguard against the possible abuse of authority; 2) it is the primary responsibility of the student personnel administrator to support consistently the central functions of the college or university which are teaching and research; 3) it is important for the student personnel administrator to maintain both his integrity and his loyalty to the central administration even when the president, academic dean or business manager have made decisions which are unpopular with students; 4) the assumption that the student functions as a unit and cannot be separated into "intellect" and "the rest of the person" is the major justification for the claim to an educational role

for student personnel administrators; and 5) the freedom to make personal decisions and to exercise the rights and shoulder the responsibilities of citizenship is an optional condition for student maturation. These statements reflect the views, with varying degrees of intensity of 93%, 92%, 90%, 86%, and 86% of the respondents, respectively.

On the other hand, greatest disagreement was found on the following issues: 1) whether or not social conduct regulations are anything more than devices for maintaining order; 2) whether or not it is desirable to excuse students in emotional difficulty from a university standard or requirement; 3) whether or not there are areas of college policy or decision-making to which students necessarily cannot make significant contributions; 4) whether or not the consensus attitudes of faculty and students should be a dominant consideration in the establishment or review of social conduct regulations; 5) whether or not the common perception of the dean as a controller and limiter of student freedoms may have negative implications for his future in higher education; and 6) whether or not a student's membership in the academic community imposes any special limitations on his citizenship freedoms. On no one of these issues did more than 50% of the respondents agree with one another.

Next Steps ...

As soon as possible, a full report of this investigation will be issued to all NASPA members. Additional analyses will attempt to relate the view on these 27 issues of the student personnel administrator to his position, experience, educational background and employing institution. In accordance with the stated purpose of the investigation the findings will be used as the basis for additional investigations and for position papers on the issues here identified.

TBD/nm
March, 1968

TABLE I

Responses of Student Personnel Administrators to Statements of Assumptions on Selected Issues

Ques. No.	Topic	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree with Res.	Disagree with Res.	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Ans.	Total & Percent Agree	Total & Percent Disagree
	Perceptions of Dean & His Responsibilities									
1	Primary respons. of dean is ...	172	202	103	15	14	2	12	477 (92%)	31 (6%)
6	Basis of deans educational role	207	219	18	15	32	12	16	444 (86%)	59 (11%)
3	Respnnsibility to provide info.	57	199	198	44	20	9	11	435 (84%)	73 (14%)
14	Justified violation of confidences	11	75	41	57	210	109	16	127 (24%)	376 (73%)
5	Dean as controller	55	171	73	40	142	18	20	299 (58%)	200 (39%)
12	Dean as adviser on morality	8	64	59	78	234	55	20	131 (25%)	367 (71%)
	Standards of Behavior & Social Conduct Regulations									
15	Purposes of college regulations	26	150	61	86	144	37	15	237 (46%)	267 (51%)
24	Role of consensus as basis of ...	26	147	123	60	124	20	21	296 (57%)	204 (39%)
8	Emotional difficulty as excuse	24	113	98	87	144	37	15	235 (45%)	268 (52%)
19	Consequences of exceptions	14	99	70	74	204	39	21	183 (35%)	317 (61%)
	The Student & The Institution									
9	Limitations on freedom	70	174	56	38	133	36	11	300 (58%)	207 (40%)
4	Basic growth directions	3	46	121	147	128	45	32	170 (33%)	320 (62%)
20	Delegation of responsibility	55	301	62		54	26	20	418 (81%)	80 (15%)
22	Stimuli to maturation	112	223	110	25	30	4	14	445 (86%)	59 (11%)
10	Basis for student involvement ...	20	102	65	76	210	30	19	187 (36%)	316 (61%)
18	Limitations on student "	52	161	70	37	160	24	14	283 (55%)	221 (43%)
	The Administrative Style of the Dean									
2	Convictions vs. loyalty	33	107	215	54	74	23	13	355 (69%)	151 (29%)
17	Expediency as basis of action	143	202	76	39	37	6	17	421 (81%)	82 (16%)
21	Avoidance of conflict	6	39	55	90	231	95	14	100 (19%)	406 (78%)
26	Support of unpopular decisions	2	8	27	69	289	107	16	37 (7%)	465 (90%)
13	Provision for privacy	57	234	81	39	74	13	20	372 (72%)	126 (24%)
27	Growth and depersonalization	35	205	69	58	102	22	28	309 (60%)	182 (35%)
7	Upholding unspecified standards	75	236	83	29	60	21	14	394 (76%)	110 (21%)
16	Protecting students	60	218	75	39	92	15	19	353 (68%)	146 (28%)
25	Influencing student values	16	111	53	98	192	26	22	180 (35%)	316 (61%)
11	Due process as respect	85	268	55	27	55	12	17	408 (79%)	94 (18%)
23	Necessity of procedural safeguards	230	219	33	5	14		17	482 (93%)	19 (4%)